

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE **35**NEW YORK POST
28 August 1985

McFarlane displays his power

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TWO events last week, one shrouded from public view and the other in the open, confirmed that Robert McFarlane's influence as President Reagan's national security adviser has reached a commanding height in the competition to control policy for the coming U.S.-Soviet summit.

The private event: Overriding the wishes of Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and defense oriented Republican senators, McFarlane struck the name of Zbigniew Brzezinski from a new Pentagon advisory panel.

The public event: By delivering a hard-hitting speech about the summit whose text was not even available to the State Dept., McFarlane showed an independence that must derive from belief in Reagan's full confidence.

This conduct suggests it is McFarlane more than Weinberger or Secretary of State

George Shultz who has the inside track with President Reagan on national security.

McFarlane's relative hard-line attitude toward the Kremlin may put the administration in a political posture closer to Reagan's own instincts than the pro-detente views held inside the bureaucracy.

The Brzezinski incident, while less important, is even more revealing of the way McFarlane operates.

He was not about to broaden the administration's national security policies with strategic input from the dynamic and imaginative Brzezinski, who was President Jimmy Carter's national security adviser but whose views are close to Reagan's.

McFarlane's decision to strike his name from the Pentagon's list of experts embarrassed Weinberger.

It also stunned Pete Wilson and other Republican senators concerned that Reagan's arms program only will widen the gap between Soviet and U.S. strategic power. They had asked Weinberger to invite Brzezinski to sit on the new panel, and Weinberger quickly agreed.

McFarlane in the past would have felt compelled to go along, but not now. He dropped Brzezinski with no attempt to justify his action beyond an offhand observation that it might make Reagan look as though he needed Democratic help.

McFarlane's self-confident qualities were put on display in his toughly-worded Aug. 19 warning to the Soviet Union.

He tried to foreclose U.S. concessions by saying that not even "incremental improvements" in U.S.-Soviet relations would be possible without basic changes in the Kremlin's policies.

White House insiders told us the only official who was aware McFarlane would make the speech — much less what he would say — was the vacationing President.

Shultz has given no indication that he fears McFarlane's rise as Reagan's mentor, or even resents the national security adviser delivering a speech that should have been in the province of the secretary of state.

McFarlane's quiet, even stealthy progression up the power curve has been possible because so far he has not been regarded as a menace at the State Dept.

An example: When Foreign Minister Rieelof Botha of South Africa made a clearly unacceptable request to meet with President Reagan in Washington three weeks ago, the White House suggested that a high State Dept. official should instead go to Vienna for talks with the South African. But Shultz picked McFarlane, who at Vienna became a major player in the South African crisis.

Inside the White House, McFarlane's ascent has not produced cheers from Donald Regan.

Instead of cultivating the new chief of staff, McFarlane used the transition to stake out a new independence for himself and his staff.

Since then, swords-point confrontations with Regan that marked that earlier period have softened.

McFarlane has started a deliberate, so far successful, campaign to assure policy dominance over the State Dept. on preparations for the Reagan-Gorbachev summit.

The progression has been lonely, with his top-level allies seemingly limited to CIA Director William Casey (whose worries about the summit parallel McFarlane's). He also has been the target of personal rumors — unproved and, he has sworn to friends, untrue.

Thin-lipped and taciturn, Bud McFarlane is not an ex-Marine colonel who wears his heart on his sleeve or complains in public about private grievances that his friends say tear at his soul.

Suffering silently, he has continued his slow ascent with every piece of evidence suggesting that he does so with full support from his boss as they approach a diplomatic confrontation.